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St. John Damascene's First Treatise on the Divine Images[1]

St. John Damascene wrote three treatises in defense of the Church's practice of venerating icons.[2] His impetus for the first of these was the forced iconoclasm made imperial policy by Emperor Leo III in 726. St. John was in a unique position to write against imperial policy because he lived all his life outside the borders of the Empire, though he was brought up in a culture that had historical ties to the Empire and thus was the beneficiary of the Christian learning that went with it. He was also well fit for the defense of Orthodoxy because he spent his adult life as a monk in Palestine (perhaps at St. Sabbas'). Monasticism there had had a long history of defending Orthodoxy, particularly in the Christological controversies. Of the three treatises, the second has a more polemical note, and the third has lengthier theological argumentation. Both, however, borrow significantly from the first, and so it is the first treatise that this paper explores. This paper is not concerned with the *florilegium* (compendium of Patristic writings with commentary) with which St. John ends the treatise.

The introduction (§§ 1–3) touches on important aspects of the purpose and nature of theological writing in general. The Christian's life is to be one of humble silence in awareness of one's unworthiness, and in repentance for one's sins. But there is a season for everything, and when the Church's faith is being attacked, those who can defend it must do so. St. John is more afraid of being held guilty by God for keeping silence than of falling out of favor with an earthly king. Though he recognizes the divinely-established authority of kings, the purity of the Church's faith is more important. No part of her Tradition is insignificant, but St. John knows that his treatise can only bear fruit and speak the truth if it is

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[1] Originally written in 2003 for a course at St. Tikhon's Seminary

[2] St. John of Damascus. *On the Divine Images*. Andrew Louth, trans. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's, 2003. I refer to this volume both for the text and for the historical information in its introduction.

blessed by God. So at the outset he asks God to take the "reins of [his] mind"[3] to guide him along the straight path of truth.

In § 2 St. John foreshadows one aspect of his argument by noting the Church's strength against idolatry. The height of perfection to which she attains means that no one should "be afraid where no fear was"[4] by suspecting her traditional iconography as idolatry. Before any of his arguments begin he already shows iconoclasm to be an immature fear unbecoming anyone who loves and knows the true Church.

The treatise comprises, broadly speaking, four interrelated arguments, each of which will be treated in particular. (1) One must distinguish between an image and an archetype. That the image is not itself the archetype does not render the image valueless. (2) One must distinguish between veneration and worship. One can venerate – *i.e.*, give honor to – many people and things because of the relationship they bear to the One whom alone we worship: God. (3) The Church has a correct, Christian, spiritual understanding of the Old Law, but the iconoclasts are inconsistent in their approach to the Law. The proscriptions of images in the Law exist to keep the Chosen People away from idolatry. And (4) because God has taken on flesh and become man, the Old Testament proscriptions of images are no longer in effect. Finally, we will look at some of St. John's miscellaneous arguments.

1.

In § 9 St. John defines an image as "a likeness depicting an archetype, but having some difference from it; the image is not like the archetype in every way."[5] His first example is the Father and the Son. The Son is an undeviating image of the Father, so much so that he bears in himself the whole Father and is equal to him in every way. Yet the Son is caused, and the Father is not caused but the cause of

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[3] p. 20

[4] Psalm 52.6

[5] p. 25

the Son. Although this is a unique archetype/image relationship in that the Father and the Son are consubstantial, St. John is thus able to ground the concept of image firmly in the Trinity itself. So we can infer that it is an essential aspect of human life, and certainly of religion, if for no other reason than that it exists even in the inner life of the Trinity.

Another kind of image is a foreshadowing. § 10 gives another example in the life of the Trinity: the eternal predeterminations of God's will. Here St. John relies on St. Dionysius, teaching that since God is eternal, what he wills to create or to bring about has been willed from eternity. What is depicted, as it were, in the Mind of God will unfailingly come to pass.

The Old Testament is rife with foreshadowings or types of the New (§ 12). The ark of the Covenant, the jar of manna, and Aaron's staff that budded are images of the Theotokos. The serpent lifted up in the wilderness prefigures the Cross. The sea and the cloud are types, respectively, of the water and the Spirit in holy Baptism.

A third type of image is a visible form taken on by or applied to that which is invisible, particularly God or angels (§ 11). Throughout the Old Testament man is made capable of dimly comprehending the invisible God or the incorporeal angels by their taking on visible forms which they do not have by nature. Man also applies images or analogies to invisible concepts which it is difficult for his mind to grasp, as when he describes the Trinity as "the sun, its light and its ray, or a fountain welling up and the stream flowing out and the flood…"[6]

Yet a fourth kind of image (§ 13) is that which serves as a memorial for past events. Those articles in the Holy of Holies (the ark, the jar, etc.) that prefigure the Theotokos, also point back to the events of Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt and thus point to the God who delivered them.

In discussing the nature of the image, St. John makes frequent reference to Old Testament practice because it was from the Old Testament that the

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[6] p. 26

iconoclasts derived their arguments against images. We shall see that he continues this emphasis in his discussion of veneration.

2.

In § 14 the divine Damascene makes the crucial distinction between "veneration of worship" and "veneration of honor." Of these two kinds of veneration the former is due only to God who in his nature is alone worthy of veneration. The veneration of honor is "offered, on account of God who is naturally venerated, to his friends and servants."[7] They are venerated not in their own right but due to their relationship with God. Such veneration is not only accorded to men and angels but is due also to places and things that are sacred to God.

Examples of this abound in the Old Testament:

> To his friends and servants, as Jesus the son of Nave and Daniel venerated the angel; or to the places of God, as David said, "let us venerated in the place, where his feet stood:"[8] or to things sacred to Him, as Israel venerated the tabernacle and the temple in Jerusalem standing in a circle around it, and then from everywhere bowing in veneration towards it … or to those rulers who had been ordained by Him, as Jacob venerated Esau, made by God the elder-born brother, or Pharaoh, appointed by God his ruler, and his brothers venerated Joseph.[9]

In § 27 St. John connects the two arguments thus far examined, making explicit that these created images found in the Old Testament were in fact accorded veneration.

Hence two of the essential components of the Church's veneration of icons (i.e. the image itself and its veneration) are found in the Old Testament.

3.

However, when we turn from the use of abstract images (like the ark) to the making of (let alone veneration of) concrete depictions, the matter becomes more complex. The Old Testament explicitly forbids "making any carved likeness, of

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[7] p. 27

[8] Ps. 131.7 (LXX)

[9] p. 28

anything in the heavens above or on the earth below,"[10] and St. John does not shy away from making an exhaustive list of similar proscriptions (§ 4). St. John shows how the Law is consistent with itself. He does this because he is able to deduce the reason for the Law against images: to keep the Chosen People from idolatry. The proscriptions of images are found to be linked with warnings against idolatry. God forbids making "a likeness of any beast that is upon the earth, a likeness of any winged bird" etc., and continues, "Beware lest you look up in the sky and see the sun and the moon and the stars and all the orders of heaven, and being led astray venerate them and worship them."[11] Yet in § 20 St. John reminds us that in the Temple Solomon had the walls painted with depictions of oxen, lions, and pomegranates.[12]

The explanation of this apparent contradiction becomes clear when we examine the cherubim that overshadowed the Mercy Seat. In § 5, St. John quotes Moses' words in connection with God's proscriptions of images: "You heard the sound of [God's] words and you did not see any likeness, but only a voice."[13] It is because God is invisible that images of him are not allowed. Yet the angels also are invisible, so why the images of the seraphim? St. John explains (§ 15) that God cannot be depicted because he is uncircumscribable. The seraphim, however, are circumscribable. Thus they can be depicted. Yet even circumscribable creatures like animals are forbidden to be depicted, so why the seraphim and the plants and animals in Solomon's Temple? St. John writes:

> He prescribes the making of an image of [the seraphim] prostrate before the divine throne, to overshadow the mercy seat; for it was fitting that the image of the divine mysteries should shadow the image of the heavenly servants.[14]

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[10] Deut. 5.8

[11] Deut. 4.17, 19

[12] III Kingdoms 6.28–29, which, however, mentions no animals either in the LXX or the Hebrew. It does mention palm trees and flowers.

[13] Deut. 4.12

[14] p. 28

One can reasonably construe the following summary of the Old Testament's teaching and St. John's interpretation of it as follows: images of the Creator are absolutely forbidden because He is uncircumscribable and formless. Images of creatures are also forbidden because the pagans worship such images as gods and thus they can easily tempt towards idolatry. However, in one context – that of the worship of the true God (in the Tent or the Temple) they may be made and employed because they are being used in a context that gives honor to the true God and thus will not tempt towards idolatry. With such a summary one is equipped to explain the apparent contradictions regarding the role of images in the Old Testament, and what their correct use actually is.

The iconoclasts therefore do not understand the true meaning of the Law, trying to observe its letter without perceiving its spirit. In addition St. John chides them for attempting to keep only part of the Law (§ 16). Why do they not also keep the sabbath and circumcise their children? Yet if they were able to keep the whole Law Christ would be of no use to them. They would be justified by the Law and would have fallen from grace.[15]

4.

The divine Damascene has thus established that the Old Covenant contained abstract images, veneration of persons, objects, and places connected to God, and depictions of creatures in the context of true worship. No depictions of God were allowed because He is uncircumscribable and formless. Thus the Incarnation is the final key to a full defense of the Church's use of iconography. God has taken on matter. His own human body, though created matter, has been hypostatically united with the Son of God and thus has "become God"[16] Because it is visible, Christ's humanity can be depicted. Giving reverence to its image, we venerate God whose flesh it is.

> Of old, God the incorporeal and formless was never depicted, but now that God has been seen in the flesh and has associated with human kind, I

[15] *cf.* Gal. 5. 2, 4.

[16] p. 29; and *cf.* § 4, p. 22

> depict what I have seen of God. I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked.[17]

It is the Manichees who abuse matter as dishonorable. But because of Christ's Incarnation not only the matter of his flesh, but "the rest of matter" too is "filled with divine energy and grace."[18]

Further, since the Old Testament allowed visible memorials of God's saving acts (*e.g.* the twelve stones taken from the Jordan to remind the Hebrews' descendants of God's allowing them to pass dry-shod with the Ark), we in the Church must also have our visible memorials of Christ's saving acts. Thus, with the holy icons, the Church continues the practice of the Old Testament in a way befitting the new context of the New Testament, in which God is now incarnate.

5.

There seems to have been a less exhaustive school of iconoclasm that, while accepting images of Christ and even of his Mother, rejected images of the saints. Against this position St. John has much to say (§§ 19–21). It is clear that the adherents of this position accept the image and thus their only reason for not accepting images of the saints is because they dishonor the saints, which is contrary to all Church tradition.

To refuse to honor the saints is to "endeavor to show that the truth is false."[19] For the truth himself has said, "For I live, and I shall glorify those who glorify me,"[20] and St. Paul said, "if we suffer together [with him], so that we are also glorified together."[21] St. John continues:

> For just as iron plunged in fire does not become fire by nature, but by union and burning and participation, so what is deified does not become

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[17] p. 29

[18] *ibid.*

[19] p. 32

[20] I Kingdoms 2.30

[21] Rom. 8.17

> God by nature, but by participation …Because by deification the saints are gods, it is said that "God stands in the company of gods, in the midst he discriminates between the gods."[22]

St. John uses an earthly analogy (§ 21) directed, seemingly, at the emperor: every king has his army, and one would never dare divest the king of his army nor of any of his royal insignia. But any earthly king should be willing to suffer this loss before he dares to take away from the heavenly King his own army, the saints, "who fight most bravely against the tyrant and triumph over the passions."[23] Indeed, they are not only Christ's army and slaves, but his co-heirs and friends[24] Any dishonor to those who share Christ's glory is obviously dishonor to Christ himself.

In discussing the saints, St. John happens upon a further argument for the icons. No one in the Church, it seems, questioned the validity of honoring saints' relics. Yet this practice is contrary to the Law, which views contact with the dead – even for Moses – as uncleanness. Christ's Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection have changed this. But if one insists on the Law forbidding images, one should not venerate relics either. In this context again St. John speaks of the honor due to human flesh because of its participation in the hypostasis of the Divine Word.

> God the Word … was united without confusion with what is ours, and unchangingly deified the flesh through the unconfused co-inherence of his divinity and his flesh one with another … [He] rose again and gave incorruption to the flesh that he had assumed from us, [thus] we have been made truly incorruptible.[25]

St. John, by way of closing the issue, refers to St. Basil's teaching on unwritten Tradition in the Church. There may be nothing in the New Testament about venerating icons, but the Tradition is well established in the Church, and,

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[22] p. 33; Psalm 81.1

[23] p. 34

[24] *cf.* John 15:14–15

[25] p. 35

as St. Basil says, “if we try to dismiss that which is unwritten among the customs as of no great authority, then without noticing it we shall damage the Gospel.”[26]

Some believed that there are in fact writings in Church tradition which teach iconoclasm, such as the writings of St. Epiphanius. St. John (§ 25) is inclined to believe that these writings are spurious. However, even if they are authentically St. Epiphanius’s, he suggests that the saint had a particular context, a particular abuse to correct in the context of which it was necessary for a time to forbid icons. But if even this should be incorrect, St. John argues that one instance is not enough to change the whole Tradition of the Church “which stretches from one end of the earth to the other.”[27]

A final matter of note is St. John’s suggestion in § 17 that our sense of sight is actually sanctified by the holy icons, as our sense of hearing is sanctified by words. He leaves this undeveloped but it evinces a profound respect for the physical matter of our lives.

Though I have presented St. John’s arguments within boundaries and categories, his own writing is less linear. These several themes recur intermingled with each other throughout the treatise. The overall affect is not unlike that of Orthodox hymnography, for which the Damascene is equally well known. The themes are rational and thorough, but because they are of God they transcend reason and comprehension. Presented in this seemingly disorderly fashion they are given power to penetrate beyond the intellect into the heart.

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[26] St. Basil the Great. *On the Holy Spirit*, 27.66 (ed. Pruche, 478–80), quoted in § 23, p. 37

[27] p. 39